

A Very Old New Morality  
Matthew 5:17-26  
February 22, 1970  
John M. Buchanan

The phrase "the New Morality" has a very unsavory image today. It is used mostly polemically, by the people who have an axe to grind, people who feel that there is something exceedingly dangerous in the current moral climate. It is, ordinarily, identified with a total rejection of all the old and honorable standards of right and wrong upon which our civilization is built. Whenever we see "New Morality" in print, more often than not, it is associated with other unsavory words and phrases such as "revolutionary, radical, S.D.S., L.S.D., Communist, Anarchy" etc. ad nauseum. In a recent discussion of the new Church School curriculum one woman said, "but, it's full of the 'new morality'". And that observation, with no other explanation, was deemed sufficient to damn the new curriculum. All in all, then, "New Morality" is a very negative phrase and a lot of people are quite threatened by it.

And yet the current debate is very similar to one which took place in Judea nearly 2,000 years ago. In fact, it's almost an exact replay. People then were upset and threatened by a teacher advocating a "new morality".

To back up a minute, human beings have always, and under every condition, been moral. That is to say, all people have some sense of "oughtness", what is right and what is wrong. Even the criminal in our society abides by a code of morality that forbids "squealing" on his accomplices. In general, the culture, no matter who you are talking about, supplies most of the "input" for this corporate sense of "oughtness" - and for the individual conscience. In a tribe of head hunters, hunting heads is something men ought to do, a very accepted and normal behavior pattern. Now we don't agree with that, but the point is that in that culture head hunting is moral.

In Jesus time "oughtness" was very carefully defined in the 613 separate precepts of the Judaic law, the Law of God. Morality was defined: whatever the law said to do was good or moral: whatever the law prohibited was bad - or immoral: In first century Judea, the Scribes were the trustees, teachers and

interpreters of the Law. The Pharisees were its most thorough adherents. The Pharisees had one objective - one "ought" - to obey the law of God. One commentator put it this way: "There was no finer standard of righteousness in the ancient world than the Pharisaic, with its emphasis on personal holiness and social responsibility."

They were very admirable men: the pillars of society. But this teacher - this advocate of a new morality - would have none of it. He wasn't satisfied with their legal perfection and kept probing beneath the surface of their neatly manicured lives to discover some rather shocking motives and feelings. In fact, to their face, he once compared them to white washed tombs, clean and spotless on the outside, but full of corruption and death inside.

Well, it's no wonder they got upset about him. If we could transpose the situation into our century it would be like a bearded hippie type from the Purdue Peace Union trying to tell the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce the difference between right and wrong. They were upset, and threatened by him and very early in his public life they began to accuse him of rejecting the old standards, of teaching an alien and new morality, of undercutting the concepts which constituted the fiber of the Jewish nation; they saw in him and his teaching the threat of cutting civilization away from its ethical moorings to drift about on the sea of moral relativity.

That's what they said about him; that's exactly the charge leveled at the new morality today and I think there is a distinct relationship between the two.

In response to their accusations he said: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets: I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them." That's clear enough, but then he hopelessly muddied the water again by adding: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

If you were a Pharisee you would smile benevolently at his condescension in the first instance. The law still stands. But then you would be provoked to a

righteous wrath. How is it possible to stand on the Law of God, and then say that righteousness is something which exceeds whatever the Pharisees were doing. Literally it was impossible: an ultimate paradox. A man could do no more than the Pharisees were already doing. They were the righteous - unless there is a new standard - a new morality.

Jesus accepted the old law. That is clear in the New Testament. He was a Jew. But he accepted the law as the revealed will of God, and not a rigid prescription for behavior. There is a difference, and a big one. Jesus accepted the principles and spirit of the law, which by the way, was its original intent. But then he went on to interpret it and deepen it, and inevitably brought into focus a man's interest, attitude, will and feelings, as well as his overt behavior.

The law said, "you shall not kill", And if we know anything at all about the Pharisees we can be certain that none of them had ever killed anyone or ever would. They were much like us in this respect. The law, at this point, restricts an extreme and has very little to do with our lives. Jesus added to that, however, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgement." That's another ball game altogether. Of course they had experienced anger, as we have. How can anger and murder be equated? Unfortunately Jesus left no book of ethics with the answers. But we do know, for instance, that murder is simply the logical end to anger; that anger is worked out in a variety of ways short of murder, but nonetheless hurting and damaging to another person. We do know that there are many ways of denying a person's existence, or manhood, such as making him sit in the back of the bus, or refusing his children entrance to our schools. We do know a little bit about a genocide that has nothing to do with gas chambers.

Jesus took the precept of the law which prohibited killing, and revealed its spirit and intent. He took a clearly stated injunction and interpreted it in a way that cut deeply into the secret heart of everyone who heard him.

That's always a very uncomfortable and unpleasant process. A good contemporary

example is the wide-spread discontent with the Supreme Court in the past decade. In our system of government the task of the Supreme Court is to interpret and protect the Constitution; no more, no less. The court has swung back and forth over the years in the way in which it interpreted the Constitution and in our time many people feel that each successive decision has actually weakened the fabric of the original document. This position is based on the assumption that the Constitution is a once-given body of legal truth which needs no further interpretation. It compares favorably with the Pharisaic position that the Jewish law was the final word in defining morality. The fact is that people get very unhappy and threatened when a constitutional principle, such as freedom of speech or assembly, is interpreted specifically to protect the freedom of someone with whom we happen to disagree. When noble principles become specific, people become threatened. When Jesus took "You shall not kill" - and broadened that to include anger and hostility of any type his contemporaries accused him of weakening the moral structure of society.

An so, as a matter of principle, to protect everything they held dear they labelled him a traitor and blasphemer. In the name of God whose will was revealed in the law they crucified him. The real issue, you see, was that they had long forgotten about the will of God: they had made the law their God. They had forgotten that the law was only the vehicle by which men could live out their gratitude and faith, and had transformed it into an end in and of itself. Judaism - which had been a living relationship with Almighty God within the terms of the Covenant, became, under their leadership and example, a highly structured, rigid ethical system by which a man earned his own righteousness.

The law which intended to see that all men were treated justly - as children of God - had become the instrument by which men separated themselves from others; the vehicle which produced nourishment for human pride and arrogance. The Pharisee, for instance, in the name of God, wrapped their robes tightly around them whenever they encountered someone who was unclean - in order to meet the law's prohibition of uncleanness.

Jesus pointed out in his teaching that people were important, not laws; that

not killing another man is not enough; he is to be valued and served and loved. Even in worship - what men do is invalidated if they are not reconciled with their brother.

So he taught his new and better morality, and continually the message was proclaimed that legalism in religion is sterile and dry and of no value whatever. Continually he held up before them love - loving activity - as the only, ultimate moral right. And the more he talked the worse they looked in the eyes of the people.

Legalism in religion is always wrong. As a young boy I had neighbors who neither smoked, drank, danced or played basketball on Sunday, and who were arrogantly proud of their legalistic morality; and who drew up a petition to keep a black family out of our neighborhood. Now, there's something wrong there - radically wrong. Likewise I think we need to ask today what purpose has been served by the trial of the Chicago 7. Justice has been served. The law has been served. But who has been helped? What is better now than it was before?

The result of our Lord's very old new morality is a terrible burden placed on our shoulders. There is something within us that likes rules and regulations. We have a need for structure; in things moral - for a law which prescribes what is right and wrong in every situation. And so we look to the church and expect religion to get us off the hot spot of decision by saying that this is always right and that is always wrong. Well it cannot be done, if one remains open and honest with the New Testament. We are called to be loving in every situation: we are called to measure and weigh each situation and then to do what is most loving and the burden of decision is on us, not on a law.

We would like very much to be able to say "Do what is right and let the chips fall where they may. And Jesus would say to us, "Whether what you are doing is right or not depends precisely upon when the chips are falling." [J. Fletcher, Situation Ethics p. 144]

The burden is ours. In the New Testament we read about a morality that is new, always new. We read about safe, traditional standards made so personal that we all come under their judgement. One commentator says that Jesus "made the

bearable precepts of law unbearable." [I.B.] And Emil Brunner candidly observed that "if looking at a woman lustfully is the equivalent of adultery, all of us are adulterers."

The New Morality of Jesus Christ puts everyone of us on the spot. But I think we are inclined to forget that the one who puts us on the spot is also the one who loves us and forgives when we fail. Jesus Christ is the one who taught this terrible new standard of righteousness: he lived it himself, and holds it up before us as a model of how life was intended to be lived. Because of that the imperative of the Gospel is that we take his teaching absolutely seriously.

But let us not forget the power of his love in our lives; a power which enables us to be loving even when we don't want to. -- Let us not forget that everyone of us is in a perpetual process of becoming more Christian -- more like him; that we do grow in faith and love.

Let us not forget that our teacher is also our Lord: that his judgement is also forgiveness.

Amen

Our father, as we confront the complex situations in our lives, grant us that courage to do what is loving; to reflect your love in our lives; to honor and respect all men and each other. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen